

Allegory and Numerology in Apocalyptic Endgames

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As a prelude, I'd like to give an example of the concept of the end of the world as the result of a diabolical chess-game, well expressed in an apocalyptic text by contemporary Egyptian author Fahd Salim: "The people [i.e. Muslims] have never discovered who the evil and dangerous [one] (= Satan?) is who manipulates this world and pushes it without mercy toward hell, who it is that moves the chess pawns on his side board, and who has an interest in everything that happens on the face of the earth."¹ This chapter will focus particularly on such metaphorical use of the notion of apocalypse.

The terms "apocalypse" and "apocalyptic" (as well as "post-apocalyptic") tend to be used quite freely to describe any of a number of end-of-the-world scenarios. What does the word "apocalypse" literally mean and what is its origin? It derives from ancient Greek ἀποκάλυψις ("uncovering"), a "lifting of the veil" or "revelation"² and primarily refers to the New Testament *Book of Revelation*, attributed to St. John the Evangelist (*Apokalypsis Ioannou*), since at least 1175.³ Strictly speaking, the only example of a true apocalypse in the Old Testament is found in the *Book of Daniel*, Ch. 7-12.⁴ Despite the paucity of apocalypses in canonical biblical literature, the genre as a whole flourished in apocryphal (non-canonical) literature between 250 B.C.E. and 250 C.E. (e.g., *1 Enoch*, *2 Esdras/4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*).⁵ Furthermore, the antecedents of this material may be found in ancient Jewish prophetic and wisdom literature, as well as early Near Eastern mythologies.

Both *Daniel* (10:2ff) and *Revelation* (1:9ff) make use of a dream or vision to present the apocalyptic revelation. In both texts, as well as in the *Greek* and *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*, a heavenly being (or angel) appears to the prophet and the revelation follows. Otherwise, the prophet lies on his bed, concerned about the future of his people, enters into a trance and is shown the future through “the visions of his head.”⁶ This is found elsewhere in *Daniel* (7:1ff), 2 *Esdras* 3:1-3; and in *1 Enoch* 1:2.⁷

The revelations typically show God’s justice taking place in the future, aiming to reveal God’s treatment of humankind and His ultimate purposes. The writers often interpret current events in relation to the end of the present age, hence constituting allegory. *Daniel* refers to “that which shall come to pass in the later days” (2:28) and *Revelation* to “that which must shortly come to pass” (1:1). Typically, the predictions of the future are based on past, known events moving to the unknown: e.g., in *Daniel* 11 the history of the Greek empire in the East from Alexander’s conquest to the latter part of Antiochus Epiphanes’ reign (verses 3-39) is presented as a prediction, continuing with a description of events which have not yet transpired but are expected by the writer (verses 40-45). The wars would result in the death of Antiochus and the collapse of his kingdom. In fact, some scholars date the book’s composition to ca. 167 B.C.E., when Antiochus sacked Jerusalem and desecrated the Holy Places. This serves as an introduction to the eschatological (end-time) predictions found in *Daniel* 12.

Similarly, in the fifth vision recounted in 2 *Esdras* (also known as 4 *Ezra*), ch. 11 and 12, possibly dating from the end of the 1st century C.E., though it has been dated as late as 218 C.E.,⁸ we see a three-headed eagle (relating to Daniel’s fourth beast/kingdom, perhaps here representing Emperors Vespasian, Titus [the general who led the siege and destruction of Jerusalem before becoming Emperor] and Domitian), rebuked by a lion (representing the

Messiah?) and then burned, symbolizing the anticipated end of the Roman Empire. In apocalyptic eschatology the end of the world is usually seen as rapidly approaching, with a claim that the adverse conditions of the present world, brought about by a “precipitating crisis,” will end in punishment of the wicked and salvation of the good, both at God’s hand.⁹

Many modern end-time predictions revolve around Armageddon, based on the ancient city of Megiddo, mentioned 12 times in the Old Testament (ten times in reference to the city itself and twice to “the plains of Megiddo”). However, none of these early references link it with any particular prophetic beliefs.¹⁰ The one reference in the New Testament is found in *Revelation*, seeming to predict only that the kings will gather together in Armageddon “for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty.”¹¹ Literally, Armageddon means “Mount of Megiddo,” though there is no actual mountain there, only a tell (mound) created by generations of people living and trading for over 6,000 years on the same spot.¹² It is located on the Via Maria, an ancient trade route linking Egypt with the northern empires of Syria, Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Modern Megiddo is a town located about 25 miles WSW of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee in the Kishon River area.¹³ Various ancient battles were fought on the site, from the 15th century to 609 B.C.E. Some scholars have suggested that Armageddon be identified with Mount Carmel: for example, E. Lohmeyer (a German commentator on the apocalypse) reckoned that Armageddon (= Har-magedon) should be translated “Megiddo range” and signified Mt. Carmel.¹⁴

An apocalyptic “end” or cosmic catastrophe is predicted in numerous texts within the Hebrew Bible, e.g., the eschatological sense of the expression, “Day of the Lord (YHWH = Yahweh).” The prophet Zephaniah (fl. late 7th century B.C.E.) predicted that YHWH would destroy “all the inhabitants of the earth” on the “Day of his wrath” (see *Zeph.* 1:7ff). Isaiah had it

that the whole world would be punished for its evil on the "Day of the Lord" (*Isaiah* 13:6f). According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' disciples asked him, "What will be the sign of your [Jesus'] coming and of the end of the world."¹⁵ We find such apocalyptic events mentioned as the darkening of the "sun" and the "moon" (*Mark* 13:24b = *Matthew* 24:29; see *Luke* 21:25), and perhaps Jesus' saying: "heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away" (*Mark* 13:31 = *Matthew* 24:35 = *Luke* 21:33).

The Beast (Greek *Thērion*) refers to two beasts described in *Revelation*. The first comes "out of the sea" and is given power and authority by the dragon. The second beast comes "out of the earth" and directs all people on earth to worship the first one. The second beast is also referred to as the false prophet (Antichrist? though this is not clear). According to gematria, or the study of numerology, the name of the Beast from the sea is not given, but its numerical value (based on the value of the Hebrew letters) is 666 or 616. One interpretation, which links Biblical prophecies with events of the 1st century C.E., identifies this beast with the Roman Empire, particularly Emperor Nero. Reasons include the angel's explanation of the beast in *Rev.* 17:7ff that the beast's seven heads are seven kings and that Nero is the sixth king, who was possibly still alive when the book was written.¹⁶ He died in 68 C.E., and most scholars attribute *Revelation* to a later period (perhaps ca. 95 C.E., during the reign of Domitian), but it may have been started earlier. Furthermore, adding the values of the Hebrew letters (*Nrwn Qsr*), parallel to the Greek rendering of "Neron Kaisar," gives a total of 666, with a variant (*Nrw Qsr* for the Latin form "Nero Caesar") giving 616.¹⁷

According to one premillennialist Christian interpretation of this tradition, Jesus will return to earth and defeat the Beast (Antichrist) and Satan in the Battle of Armageddon. Then Satan will be put into the "bottomless pit" or Abyss for 1,000 years, a period known as the

Millennium. After being released from the Abyss, Satan will gather from the four corners of the earth Gog and Magog (originally found in the *Book of Ezekiel*, where they seemingly represent Eastern nomadic peoples). They will encamp, surrounding the “holy ones” and the “beloved city” (Jerusalem). God will send fire down from heaven to devour Gog and Magog. The devil, death, hell and those not found written in the Book of Life will be thrown into Gehenna (the lake of fire burning with brimstone).¹⁸

Two American Protestant groups originating in the 19th century, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, believe that Armageddon is the means by which God will cleanse the earth of evildoers, leaving only the righteous.¹⁹ Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Satan’s gathering of the nations of the earth began with the mustering leading up to declaration of World War I. “Actual combat against Satan and his demon horde began with Christ’s enthronement in A.D. 1914. This combat was cut short in A.D. 1918, to be resumed at Armageddon.”²⁰ Jehovah’s Witnesses hold that the armies of heaven, led by Jesus, will destroy all forms of human government and then Jesus, along with a selected 144,000 followers, will rule earth for 1,000 years. Satan and his demons will be bound for that period, unable to influence mankind. After the 1,000 years are ended, the second resurrection will take place, Satan will be released and tempt humanity one last time. Those who follow Satan will be destroyed along with him, leaving humankind at peace with God forever, free of sin and death.²¹

The Seventh-day Adventists equate the terms Armageddon, Day of the Lord and the Second Coming of Christ. They thought that a perceived unity between spiritualism, American Protestantism and Roman Catholicism would set the stage for Armageddon, which will leave the earth desolate for the millennium.”²² Drawing on *Revelation* 16ff. they claimed the three symbolic characters mentioned there (the dragon, the beast and the false prophet) represent the

false religious systems of the world, both heathen and professed Christian. The “holy war” between God and His people on one side, and the devil and his follower (apostate Christians and devotees of false religions) on the other, will be brought to an end by the return of Jesus Christ.²³ The beast and the false prophet will be cast alive into the lake of fire. All the unrighteous who have not yet been killed will be put to death, “destroyed by the brightness of Christ’s visible presence.”²⁴ Satan will be bound in the Abyss or bottomless pit for 1,000 years. This will be followed by two resurrections, one special (believers) and one general.

In Islam and in sects deriving from it, such as Ahmadiyya and Bahá’í, Armageddon plays a significant role. In Ahmadiyya, also known as Ahmadi Islam, Armageddon is viewed as a spiritual battle or struggle between the forces of good (e.g., righteousness, purity and virtue) and the forces of evil. The final struggle comes as satanic influence is let loose with the emergence of Gog and Magog. Satan gathers all his powers and uses his methods to mislead people, introducing an age where materialism, atheism, iniquity and promiscuity abound. The Messiah will return to bring about the spiritual reformation of mankind. This age will last for about 1,000 years as in Judeo-Christian and Islamic prophecies of the Apocalypse, with the assembling of mankind under one faith, identified as Islam.²⁵

Like Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Bahá’í faith also associates various events during the world wars with Armageddon. The first deals with a series of tablets written by Bahá’ulláh, founder of the faith, sent to various kings and rulers. The second and best known relates to events near the end of World War I, involving General Allenby and the Battle of Megiddo (1918), wherein World Powers are said to have drawn soldiers from many parts of the world to engage in battle there. In winning the battle Allenby prevents the Turks from killing ‘Abdúl-

Baha, then head of the faith, whom they intended to crucify. A third interpretation reviews the overall progress of the world wars, and the situation of the world before and after.²⁶

Various American Christian fundamentalist groups hold apocalyptic beliefs suggesting that the second coming of Christ and Armageddon will take place with the return of Jews to Israel.²⁷ Christian Zionism dates back to early 19th-century England with a movement known as premillennial dispensationalism, based on the teachings of a renegade Irish clergyman, John Nelson Darby (spokesman of the Plymouth Brethren Movement), and a Scottish evangelist, Edward Irving, which emphasized the literal and future fulfillment of such events as the Rapture, the rise of the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, and the role that a revived Israel would play in the final days. Darby brought these doctrines to the U.S. during eight missionary visits, capturing the minds and hearts of those who attended Bible and prophecy conferences in the post-Civil War period. Darby's teachings featured prominently in sermons of the 1880s-1920s. Christian Zionism gained significant support from Protestant fundamentalism, including much of the Southern Baptist Convention, the charismatic, Pentecostal and independent churches. The alliance of Christian Zionists and the pro-Israel lobby solidified during the Reagan administration, though it weakened somewhat during the Bush and Clinton years.²⁸ In addition to accusations that he tried to foment Armageddon with the wars he launched in the Middle East during his presidency, George W. Bush has spoken at fundraising events for the Muslim Jewish Bible Institute, an organization which aims to promote the second coming by converting Jews to Christianity.²⁹

This chapter could easily have focused just on Islamic eschatology and views on Yawm ad-Dīn ("Day of Judgment") which forms one of the six articles of faith in Islam.³⁰ The 75th Sura (chapter) of the Qur'an has as its main focus the final resurrection, which is also described

extensively in the *hadith* (the record of the sayings of the Prophet) and subsequent commentaries. Though not mentioned in the Qur'an, Masih al-Dajjal (comparable to the Christian Antichrist) is prominent in *hadith* and later Islamic literature, as is the Mahdi, who is also absent in the Qur'an. The Mahdi will appear to bring justice and truth to all, the entire world will accept Islam, and his death (before the day of resurrection) will bring turmoil, uncertainty, and temptation. There are disagreements over the Mahdi's precise relationship to Isa (Jesus). For Sunnis, the Mahdi is Muhammad's successor who is yet to come. For most Shi'a Muslims, the Mahdi was born but disappeared and will remain hidden until he reappears to bring justice to the world, a doctrine known as occultation (since he is "occult," literally hidden). For Twelver Shia's this "hidden Imam" is Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam.³¹ Some believe that Isa (Jesus) will return as a just judge; he will die after 40 years and be buried in a spot beside the Prophet's tomb in Medina that has been reserved for him.³² Like the other Abrahamic religions, Islam believes in the resurrection of the dead, a final conflict and eternal division between the virtuous and evil-doers. Islamic apocalyptic literature describing Armageddon is often known as *fitnah*, *malāhim* or *ghabbah* in Shi'a Islam. The righteous are rewarded with the joys of paradise (Jannah), while the unrighteous are tortured in hell (Jahannam, cf. Hebrew Gehenna).³³

I would like to end this chapter with a discussion of Dabiq. Located NE of Aleppo, Syria, about 10 km from the Turkish border, it was the site of a decisive battle between Ottoman Turks and the Mamluk Sultanate in 1516, which led to Ottoman control of the eastern Mediterranean and eventually Egypt and even the Hijaz in western Arabia, which includes Mecca and Medina. Islamic eschatology accepts that it is one of two possible locations for an epic battle between invading Christians and defending Muslims which will result in a Muslim

victory and mark the beginning of the world's end. The Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) believes Dabiq is where a decisive epic battle will take place with Christian forces from the West.³⁴ In August 2014 ISIS forces captured the town, in the process destroying the tomb of the 8th-century caliph, Suleyman ibn Abd al-Malik, which they considered idolatrous. Their actions seem to be fulfilling one prophecy from the *hadith*:

The Last Hour would not come until the Romans [here symbolizing the Eastern Roman empire] land at al-A'maq [nearby] or in Dabiq. An army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina (to counteract them).³⁵

The prophecy probably first circulated in the 8th century, when the Umayyad caliph Suleyman attempted to conquer Constantinople, stirred by a prophecy that someone bearing the name of a prophet would conquer the city (Suleyman = Solomon, considered a prophet of Islam). In 716, too sick to launch the attack himself, Suleyman handed the command to his brother, who led a failed siege on the "Roman" capital. Suleyman died waiting for the victory that never came and his was the tomb destroyed by ISIS.³⁶ The term "Romans" in the *hadith* has also been interpreted as Christians (even specifically Roman Catholics or the Vatican). The *hadith* further relates a subsequent Muslim victory, followed by a peaceful takeover of Constantinople and the final defeat of the Antichrist, after the descent of Jesus from heaven,³⁷ who is usually viewed as leading the Muslims. In fact, in one prophecy attributed to Muhammad and quoted by the first emir of the Islamic State, Jesus will "shatter the crucifix, kill the swine, abolish the protection tax, and make wealth to flow until no one needs any more."³⁸

It is interesting to note that *Dabiq* is also the name of the official online magazine of the Islamic State, testifying to the place's significance in their ideology. The editors explained why they chose this name: "The area will play a historical role in the battles leading up to the

conquests of Constantinople, then Rome.”³⁹ However, “first the Islamic State had to ‘purify Dabiq’ from the ‘treachery’ of the other Sunni rebels who held it and raise the flag of the caliphate over its land.”⁴⁰ The prophetic view of Dabiq continued after its capture: e.g., when a masked British member of ISIS beheaded a U.S. aid worker in November 2014, he growled: “Here we are, burying the first American Crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive.”⁴¹ The other site mentioned in the *hadith*, al-A’maq, also frequently figures as a hinge point in the apocalyptic tradition. Scene of frequent battles between the early Muslims and the Byzantines, it is not surprising that it would resurface in the modern apocalyptic tradition as the place where the Mahdi and the Antichrist will have a final confrontation.⁴² As U.S. and Turkish-backed rebel forces prepared for the battle to retake Mosul in October 2016, though, Dabiq was retaken without a struggle, despite the apocalyptic rhetoric of the Islamic State.⁴³

As with numerology in the *Book of Revelation* relating to current and anticipated events, we find more and more predictions of the coming end times, once again linked with specific dates and places in the Middle East. For example, the Institute of End Times Research Center, in New Orleans, claims that the first phase of the End Times will last from 2013 to 2022, “based on numerical analysis of the Quran, *hadith*, Arabic words, and historical events.”⁴⁴ The End Times Book, which they publish, states:

[T]he first phase of the End of Time is likely to start in 2015 (or 2016) when the first evil person... the False Elijah/Elias, Messiah son of Joseph, etc., arrives. This will trigger the Imam Mahdi... to appear... The last evil person (Dajjal/Antichrist... False Messiah son [of] David, etc.) will come (or return) in [the] year 2022. In response, Prophet Jesus Christ son of Mary... will come down from Heaven to Earth and end [the] Kingdom of

the Dajjal (Antichrist)... Thus, the first phase of the End Times will end in 2022 (1444 Hijri).⁴⁵

NOTES

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